Introduction: Linguistic Turns and Literary Modernism

> Sunsets were redder and more intense; dawns were whiter and more auroral. Of our crepuscular half-lights and lingering twilights they knew nothing. The rain fell vehemently, or not at all. [. . .] The withered intricacies and ambiguities of our more gradual and doubtful age were unknown to them. Violence was all. The flower bloomed and faded. The sun rose and sank. The lover loved and went.
>
> –Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*.[1]

1. Modern Novels and Vagueness

In "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth," T. S. Eliot declares that the role of art in modern times is to provide a solid "scaffolding" – the "mythical method" in Joyce's case – for a world that is itself meaningless.[2] Eliot's contemporaries and critical descendants also emphasize the "hard" and firmly delineated quality of modernist writing. It must be "the definite and concrete," "economical and spare," "objective," "*particular*"; it must have "fine precision of expression"; it must seek "to refine, to clarify, to intensify"; it must have "unity of form, culminations, and shapes" – above all, it must not be "vague."[3] But are concrete and precise really the best adjectives to describe works like Joyce's "damned monster-novel"?[4] Virginia Woolf offered a very different view of modern fiction when she recorded her revelation while writing *Jacob's Room*:

> happier today than I was yesterday having this afternoon arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel . . . For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen, all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist.[5]

Woolf's plan for *Jacob's Room* explicitly challenges Eliot's contention that literature ought to provide an objective "scaffolding." But what exactly is

the "new form" for the "new novel"? And what would it mean for a novel to be "crepuscular"?

On November 25, 1922, a few months after the publication of both *Ulysses* and *Jacob's Room*, Bertrand Russell delivered a paper entitled "Vagueness" in front of a small group at Oriel College at Oxford University.[6] In contrast to Eliotic precision, Russell lamented that he "propose[d] to prove that all language is vague and that therefore my language is vague." He stated:

> You all know that I invented a special language with a view to avoiding vagueness, but unfortunately it is unsuited for public occasions. I shall therefore, though regretfully, address you in English, and whatever vagueness is to be found in my words must be attributed to our ancestors for not having been predominantly interested in logic.[7]

Russell claimed (with his characteristic wry humor) to regret addressing his audience in English because of its "vagueness." "We can see an ideal of precision [in English], to which we can approximate indefinitely," he asserted, "but we cannot attain this ideal . . . It is therefore not applicable to this terrestrial life, but only to an imagined celestial existence" (*V* 65). However, aspiring to this "celestial existence" linguistically and logically was a serious necessity, and therefore Russell insisted that language ought to be subjected to rigorous scientific standards:

> Science is perpetually trying to substitute more precise beliefs for vague ones; this makes it harder for a scientific proposition to be true than for the vague beliefs of uneducated persons to be true, but makes scientific truth better worth having if it can be obtained. (*V* 68)

Russell explained that he was giving the talk because "vagueness is very much more important in the theory of knowledge than you would judge it to be from the writings of most people," and he intended to demonstrate that "the process of sound philosophizing . . . consists mainly in passing from those obvious, vague, ambiguous things . . . to something precise, clear, definite."[8]

In "Vagueness," Russell highlighted several philosophical questions that were fermenting in 1922 and that are germane to the treatment of language and form in the "new novel." First, to amend the words of Joyce, "it seems language was to blame" for what appeared to be otherwise irresolvable philosophical paradoxes. Russell called this tendency to treat purely linguistic confusions as actual philosophical questions the "fallacy of verbalism" (*V* 62). Second, Russell asserted that analytical methods and logical formulae were needed to clean up the muddle in which philosophy found

itself. Scientific methods were granted a status above previous approaches to philosophy. And finally, Russell claimed that our ordinary language, in this "terrestrial life," is so riddled through with vagueness that a new "special language" is required to approach philosophical questions (*V* 61).

What was this vagueness Russell was so worried about? The concept of vagueness has a long and volatile history.[9] Terms with "vague boundaries" have been an object of philosophical debate since Eubulides of Miletus in the fourth century BCE first asserted his sorites paradox (*soros* is "heap" in Greek):

> I say: tell me, do you think that a single grain of wheat is a heap? Thereupon you say: No. Then I say: What do you say about 2 grains? For it is my purpose to ask you questions in succession, and if you do not admit that 2 grains are a heap then I shall ask you about 3 grains. Then I shall proceed to interrogate you further with respect to 4 grains, then 5 and 6 and 7 and 8, and you will assuredly say that none of these makes a heap.[10]

The boundary between several grains of sand and a heap, or a man with little hair and a bald man, appears unstable. Recent theorists of vagueness continue to wrestle with this problem – to such an extent that M. F. Burnyeat exclaims, "Eubulides himself can hardly have foreseen that his modest heap of grain would grow to menace Olympus and undermine the foundations of logic."[11] The sorites paradox menaces logic because:

> If you remove a single grain of sand from a heap of sand, you surely still have a heap of sand. But if you take a heap and remove grains one by one, you can apply that principle at each stage, which will commit you to counting even the solitary final grain as a heap. This is a sorites paradox.[12]

Logicians emphasize that terms such as "heap" and "tall," or even "child" or "belief," have boundaries that are fuzzy so that when logic is applied to define them, although "the premises are highly plausible, [and] the inference seems valid, . . . the conclusions are absurd."[13] Vague boundaries appear to undermine the principle of bivalence – either something is or is not true – therefore shaking the foundations of classical logic.

Although in classical times paradoxes like the sorites were actually used to test scholars' dialectical skills – and the "heap" was so famous a paradox that the average reader was supposed to note allusions to heaps[14] – it was not until the end of the nineteenth century with the origins of the analytic tradition that vagueness resurfaced as a key concept. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the problem of vagueness in language became a central subject of debate in pragmatism and the philosophy of language. Ideal language theorists such as Gottlob Frege

and Russell devised new formal languages and symbolic systems in order to avoid the "irregular, unperspicuous, and ambiguous" qualities of colloquial language, while pragmatists such as Charles Sanders Peirce and William James believed that the logicians' efforts to avoid vagueness were futile and therefore chose to enlist vagueness as a tool.[15] Both Peirce and William James recommended "'vagueness' as a counteraction to the dogmatizing of existent truths and as the necessary condition for the exploratory search for new truths," but Peirce believed that the new truths would themselves be precise, whereas William James asserted that vagueness itself finally had a "proper place in our mental life."[16] The positive re-evaluation of vagueness culminated in Wittgenstein's praise of the "blur" in *Philosophical Investigations*, where all language is defined as necessarily vague, but unproblematically so, because vagueness does not undermine a language's utility. For Stanley Cavell and the Ordinary Language philosophers in Wittgenstein's wake, the vagueness of language is a given, and it is philosophy's duty to demonstrate how ordinary usage acts pragmatically in order to "explain how the language we traverse every day can contain undiscovered treasure."[17]

Russell's lecture participated in this revolutionary movement in philosophy re-evaluating the vagueness of language. His lecture actually stemmed from questions he encountered when writing two essays: one an introduction for the first English publication of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the second a review of John Dewey's *Essays in Experimental Logic*. Russell's claim that an ideal language based on logic would be free of vagueness was also implicitly an argument against pragmatists who pointed to the concept of vagueness to demonstrate the faults of classical logic. In fact, F. C. S. Schiller, expected to hold the opposing pragmatic view, had been asked by the society to prepare a response to Russell's lecture in advance, so the two camps were in place before the talk began. Ideal language theorists, like Russell, posited language's fallibility and advanced a more scientific approach to philosophy, yet this debate over language's possible precision was initiating a drastic change in philosophy. Richard Rorty later called this change in early twentieth-century philosophy "the linguistic turn" – "the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use."[18] Whether through G. E. Moore's definition of "good" in *Principia Ethica*, Russell's desired "celestial" language, or Wittgenstein's propositions in the *Tractatus*, some philosophers were turning to an analysis of language to solve philosophical problems.[19] Pragmatists, in contrast, thought these incipient modes of analytical thought

and methods of linguistic analysis missed the point: Schiller, in fact, had already written a scathing critique of formal logic (a book that he had dedicated to William James).[20] The question of language's vagueness was at the core of this debate between analytic and pragmatist philosophers, because it underscored either language's shortcomings or its enormous potential, depending upon one's philosophical view.

In this book I argue that the character of modernist fiction is best understood in light of these transformations in early twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy. Moreover, while early analytical philosophy set up the problem of vagueness that modernist fiction writers explored, their response (by and large) more closely resembles that of the pragmatic philosophers. Modern novelists, from Henry James to James Joyce, were simultaneously enacting their own kind of linguistic turn in fiction, and, in this linguistic turn, too, vagueness played a major role. Henry James declared his "confidence in the positive saving virtue of vagueness," while Woolf, in "Modern Fiction," made a "confession of vagueness," and Joyce created a "vehicle of a vague speech" in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.[21] Ian Watt contends there is a close analogy between the epistemological premises of formal realism and those of "philosophical realism."[22] In this book, I am proposing a close analogy between the modern novel's attempt to revise the conventions of the realist novel and the revolt against positivism in the philosophy of language.[23] My book thus tells the other half of Watt's story, arguing that literary modernism is linked to the challenge posed to both philosophical and literary realisms through the problem of vagueness. Significantly, the embrace of vagueness in fiction and the linguistic turn in philosophy is not just a coincidence. There is a historical explanation for modernism's new fuzzy fictions, which experiment with long indeterminate sentences, blur genres, or create new languages. Novelists, I argue, assimilated contemporary linguistic questions, then seen as philosophical questions, into fiction. Indeed, because language was the fiction writer's domain, the novel, it seemed, could offer answers to philosophical problems that philosophy itself could not resolve.

Ironically, William James, who called for the "re-instatement of the vague" in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), deplored the parallel movement in fiction.[24] Although he emphasized the shortcomings of scientific precision for psychology, he simultaneously expressed his frustration with the vague style of his brother's novel *The Golden Bowl*:

> I don't enjoy the kind of "problem," . . . and the method of narration by interminable elaboration of suggestive reference (I don't know what else to call it, but you know what I mean) . . . won't you, just to please Brother, sit

> down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in style? Publish it in my name, I will acknowledge it, and give you half the proceeds.[25]

The novels of James, Woolf, and Joyce (along with others such as Joseph Conrad, Dorothy Richardson, Gertrude Stein, and Jean Rhys), all resist the qualities William James sought and revel instead in "psychological commentaries," indecisiveness in plot and action, and "absolute" vagueness in style. If the conventions of the realist novel can be summarized by an emphasis on "originality" or "the novel" plot, "the repudiation of figurative eloquence," and "the particularization of character and background, of naming, temporality, causation, and physical environment," the modernist novel's focus on subjectivity, resistance to anything easily definable as plot, and figurative and stylistic eloquence pushed to the brink of solipsism all demonstrate a new set of conventions in fiction.[26] Rather than attempting to eliminate vagueness, modernist fiction may probe vagueness as the best way to examine psychological depth, to depict sexual indeterminacy, or to register disenchantment with the capitalist, bourgeois, and symbolic status quo while still existing within those systems.[27] Even William James grudgingly admitted that his brother achieved a "paradoxical success in this unheard of method."[28]

Modernist Fiction and Vagueness contends that early twentieth-century fiction, along with pragmatism's "reinstatement of the vague," often prioritizes the elusive and the unfixable, even as much modernist poetics, famously through the statements of T. S. Eliot, Hulme, and Pound, praises objectivity, precision, and clarity. Indeed, this book works to revise a current trend in literary criticism (that has its roots in early Eliot) that ties modernist linguistic experimentation predominantly to the (then) new analytic philosophy. While the connections between, for example, the analytic grouping of Hulme, Russell, Ogden, Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, and Joyce's *Ulysses* are key to note and will be discussed in Chapter 3, the resistance to this logical reform movement, crystallized in pragmatism and in Wittgenstein's later writings, were equally if not more influential on literary modernism, particularly as it is embodied in the fiction of James, Woolf, and Joyce.[29] This book both explains the debate between analytic and pragmatic philosophers over the question of vagueness, shedding light on what logical reform aimed to reform, and simultaneously demonstrates that modernism derived energy from the debate *itself* about language's possible precision. From Ogden's creation of Basic English to Joyce's re-babelization in *Finnegans Wake*, or from Ezra Pound's Imagist

Manifesto to Woolf's "vague way," literary modernism is less defined by Eliotic structure and coherence than by its investigation of the borders of linguistic precision.

But what would it mean to call a novel "vague"? Why, according to Google's Ngram Viewer, which graphs the appearance of words in English fiction, does the use of the word "Vague" hit an all-time high in the early 1920s?[30] This book seeks to answer these questions by tracing a taxonomy of stylistic vagueness in modernist fiction from Henry James's long indeterminate clauses, to Woolf's dissolution of direct discourse, to Joyce's verbal coinages and puns in *Finnegans Wake*. Thematically, the vagueness stretches from James's ineffable secrets, to Woolf's impressionistic renderings of subjectivity, to the climactic moment when Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom finally meet in *Ulysses* and the reader is ultimately radically uncertain of the ramifications. Being vague carries different weight in each of these cases, but what is consistent is the sense that the precision the modernists attributed to British literary realism was stridently under attack.

Vagueness, unlike ambiguity or multiplicity, fails to provide clear, if multiple, ways to read a text, which explains why William Empson, for one, described vagueness as a bad or failed kind of ambiguity. In *The Sacred Fount*, for example, both James's dialogue and his plot have been repeatedly decried as impossibly vague: This combination means readers are not even sure what exactly they are supposed to be unsure about. In *The Waves*, in contrast, Woolf seems to clearly delineate the natural and the human worlds, and yet then this delineation begins to blur. Vagueness, therefore, brings up a range of issues for fiction, of which two are salient and related: On the one hand, an author who seems to be vague may in fact be writing with precision about an atmosphere or situation that is itself vague; on the other hand, another writer may be vague about a precise situation in order to make the reader think. (The following chapters will tackle which kinds of vagueness James and Woolf may be deploying in these works.) Regardless, modernist fiction's affect is usually one of puzzlement and indecision, rather than the satisfaction derived from the closure of a Victorian novel (like Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Dickens's *Great Expectations*). If, as Sianne Ngai has argued, twenty-first-century aesthetic categories such as zany, cute, and interesting show us "how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven condition of late capitalism," what does an aesthetic of vagueness reveal about the modernist era?[31] Further, and appropriately given our growing distance from the twentieth century,

vagueness puts into question the division between twentieth-century modernist and postmodernist fiction. If postmodernism defines itself by "renounce[ing] closed structure, fixed meaning, and rigid order in favor of play, indeterminacy, incompleteness, uncertainty, ambiguity, contingency and chaos," the vagueness of modernist fiction shows it was always already postmodern.[32]

Modernist Fiction and Vagueness begins examining vagueness by explaining why a little question about how many grains of sand make up a heap has prompted philosophical debate since Classical times. Having established the central disagreements between pragmatists and early analytic philosophers about vagueness, I will turn to those for whom "ordinary language" is often an oxymoron: the novelists. Ever since F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* (1948) regretted the "inveterate indirectness of the later James," scholars have sought to justify the Master's stylistic ambiguities and linguistic extravagances.[33] By placing Henry James's fiction in relation to the debate between William James and Peirce over vague language, I give a new explanation for why Lambert Strether is "grandly vague" and how "the great vagueness" overcomes James's characters and plots.[34] Henry James's exclamation to William that he had been "unconsciously" pragmatic in his writing underscores, I argue, their similar interest in the vagueness of language.[35] Therefore, next I turn to the novels of Woolf, who announced "we want to be rid of realism," and for whom even James's fiction was too structured.[36] In contrast to Russell's assertion that each word ought to be used precisely, Woolf parodies the analytic philosopher in her character of Mr. Ramsay and advocates the "vagueness of the finest prose." The increasing formal experimentation in Woolf's later novels such as *Jacob's Room* and *The Waves* embodies the lessons about realism, objectivity, and gender that she teaches Katharine Hillberry in her early work, *Night and Day*.

Just as Russell Goodman argues that there is a "a classical American presence in analytic philosophy" channeled by James through to Wittgenstein, so also this book contends there is a classic American interest in vagueness in literature channeled by the James brothers through to the "British" modernists, Woolf and Joyce.[37] From James and Woolf, therefore, I turn to Joyce, Wittgenstein, and C. K. Ogden and compare Wittgenstein's language games and the "blur" of *Philosophical Investigations* to Joyce's "vague speech" in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*. Ogden, as the translator of both the *Tractatus* and sections of *Finnegans Wake*, acts as a bridge between these two figures because both were writing him letters about their projects at the same

time. Moreover, Ogden's translation of Joyce's "Anna Livia Plurabelle" into Basic English, a new simplified language aimed at eliminating miscommunication that Ogden created in the aftermath of World War I, in many ways puts the *Tractatus*' vision of language to work through the art of translation. Just as the idea of the vague undermines Wittgenstein's early "picture" theory of language, leading to his concept of the "language-game" (*PI* §48), so also for Joyce "vague speech" is an alternative to that taught by "christian minstrelsy" (*FW* 371). One of Joyce's central themes is establishing that language, rather than a gift from God, is in fact a social game, enmeshed in the power relations of nationhood, gender, race, and sexuality. I argue that deconstructive readings find fertile ground in Joyce because he was himself interested in debates about pragmatism and language. The accretive and omnivorous language of *Finnegans Wake* shared in its time's vision of constructing an international language, like Ogden's Basic English, and its fecundity parallels the encyclopedic styles of *Ulysses*.

I conclude by returning to the figure of T. S. Eliot ("In my beginning is my end" as he writes in *Four Quartets*) to examine Eliot's own complicated relationship with language's imprecision in his critical essays and their important, sustained influence upon modernist literary criticism.[38] If poststructuralism, as has been argued, is a "Gargantua grown out of Empsonian ambiguity," Empson's ambiguity, in turn, has roots in Eliot's injunction that modern writing must be *difficult* and allusive and yet somehow form an organic "whole."[39] Eliot, like his professor Russell, sought to stem the tide of increasing vagueness, but he acknowledged that "verbalism," "the verbal disease," and the "dissociation of sensibility" came hand-in-hand with modernity.[40] The conclusion juxtaposes Eliot's "Hamlet" essay and Russell's "Vagueness" lecture, arguing that Eliot's contentions for an "objective" art were largely motivated by his admiration for Russell's style, method, and hatred of language's vagueness. Further, in examining Eliot's early essays on James, Woolf, and Joyce (as well as his unpublished lecture notes on other contemporaries, such as Lawrence and Empson), I put forward the case that he promotes both analytic virtues and analytic methods. And yet I also disagree with those who parody Eliot as the ultimate New Critic; instead, Eliot's own move away from analytic philosophy back to a pragmatic approach to language that he somewhat abhorred in his early Harvard years means that his later poetry, such as *Four Quartets*, had more in common with the vagueness of modernist fiction than his early important critical statements would lead us to believe. Just as Woolf portrays the scholar-philosopher as missing the essential questions in life, so also Eliot portrays Russell (and analytic philosophy in

general) as blinded by its devotion to positivism, namely its faith in empiricism and logic. This project concludes by examining the way in which New Critical methods of resolving ambiguity – crystallized in Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* – actually worked against the grain of modernist experimentation, attempting to categorize and delimit a style that embodied vagueness.

Each chapter of the book joins a philosopher with a novelist, not only to recall that Woolf and Eliot attended "Bertie's lectures," or that Henry James and Peirce spent a winter as "intimates," but also to give a sense of the urgency surrounding the questions of linguistic vagueness during the modernist period. Primarily, this book engages with literary vagueness, the history of philosophy, and very specific historical debates about vagueness; I am focused on the ways that the literary modernists perceived and portrayed philosophy and vagueness, and I do not aim to discover the solution(s) to vagueness as a philosopher might. That said, there are also moments when the novelists seem to prefigure twenty-first-century analytic and pragmatic approaches to vagueness, or when I will turn to the current scholarship on artistic vagueness (for terms such as de-differentiation, pre-differentiation, and pre-reification) to discuss the various techniques of literary vagueness.[41] In addition, the relationships among the philosophers and the novelists in each chapter are not always the same. While in the James chapter, the philosophers and novelist knew each other intimately, and I make a case for Henry James's reimagining of Peirce's pragmaticism; in the Woolf chapter Russell represents one of many strong philosopher figures that Woolf knew well, including, of course, her father, Leslie Stephen, and G. E. Moore, so her reaction against Russell's impersonal logic fits into a larger picture. In fact, there is a growing element of mediation across the chapters, so that whereas the James chapter focuses on brothers and childhood friends, the Woolf chapter examines acquaintances, and the final chapter's study of the relationship between Joyce and Wittgenstein is triangulated through Ogden. This growing element of mediation works to solidify my argument that the reaction against positivism in literary circles was not merely personal but part of a general trend.

I chose this particular constellation of fiction writers because of their philosophical ties (through their family, friends, or education) and their novels' investment in language's vagueness. But this is not solely an influence study. That is, I do not think it was always as simple as saying that sudden interest in language's vagueness arose in philosophy and then was imported to fiction. Instead of studying how fiction "applies" philosophy, I argue that modernism yields an exemplary case of discursive evolution,